Foreword

The heady days of magically entering search words into Google or Bing and getting “the answer,” or of posting photos to Snapchat that “disappeared forever,” or of blithely providing sensitive personal data online through Facebook, or of gathering hordes of followers on Twitter—with no thought as to who might be sniffing and sorting and recording and sharing our data and our content and our clicks—are gone. We now know that, like love at first sight, we can’t always trust our instincts. Our relationship with media, while highly gratifying and satisfying in so many ways, is a deep and nuanced one, with “giving and getting” that’s not always readily apparent, with consequences that may undoubtedly delight but may also surprise and indeed damage us.

With trust in media quickly eroding, advocates for media literacy have puzzled in recent years about why media literacy education has yet to take root in education systems – but at long last, the sense of urgency that propels such change is emerging as people world-wide question the ubiquitous media surrounding them and ask, “What and Whom Can We Trust?” and “What is Real?”

As we become more and more deeply engaged with the media – with screens and buttons in front of our eyes in all our waking hours and messages pinging during our sleep as well -- we realize more and more that we have an enduring relationship with media that lasts forever and that must be examined and managed and evaluated over time. We come to see that, like a seductive lover, media calls for us to take off the blinders and to look at it with a critical eye.

This recognition is fanning a different kind of flame – the flame of media literacy. While media companies and we ourselves invest more and more precious resources—time and money—into media production and social media, the education system has scarcely recognized the importance of media literacy education. But this blindness is now being seen as unacceptable and indeed, unsustainable. In an information age, information is valued differently and the traditional ways of delivering such value are toppling. Industrial-age business models, including the financial models upon which education systems are built, are no longer working. They are too expensive and inefficient and often ineffective. The new information age, with the internet as its backbone and data as its lifeblood, is gradually emerging. At last, media literacy pedagogy is being seen as central to education in this 21st Century, instead of as a peripheral and enigmatic subject. Media literacy education is a pathway for answers to problems and to opportunity.

Just as we must interrogate the media and its role in our lives, we must also examine and advance our thinking about media literacy and the pedagogy surrounding it. This “Handbook of Research on Media Literacy in the Digital Age” does just that. Leading scholars from around the world have thoughtfully tackled some of the major issues and challenges that we face in embedding media literacy into our academics and into our everyday lives. Brazil, China, Kashmir, the United Kingdom, Pakistan, Italy, Turkey, Spain, Japan, Australia, Vietnam, Malaysia, and the United States are all represented, with an
attendant variety of political philosophies and media regulation. Regardless, media literacy represents common ground through which to explore mutual interests and divergence.

These pages reveal the transformative nature of media literacy, and the global applications for media literacy. Just highlighting some words from various chapter titles tells a story: critical, value, capacities, multiliteracies, arts, culture, empathy, personalized, holistic, universal, organizations, ecology, storytelling, transmedia puzzles, productivity, innovation, parody, humor, mobile. Yes, these words are important and indeed, compelling. These words help make life worth living.

Through such exploration, we come to see how media literacy may be about all subjects, but that it also offers a framework for navigating any subject. Media literacy offers a base of understanding that can be shared and discussed and expanded upon; it is open and not closed; it offers a way to free one’s mind and express one’s views and to participate in the world.

Media literacy offers questions, not answers. It offers concepts, not directives and factoids. It offers a systematic way to interrogate how media systems operate globally. Media literacy provides ways to filter any media through frameworks that can be applied by anyone, anywhere, anytime. It is a heuristic that aptly applies to the digital media age as well as to landscape linguistics, print media and the arts. It offers empowerment through education, not through arms.

But teaching media literacy requires a different skill set than becoming media literate. Educators have the challenge of not only understanding media literacy for themselves, but also of being able to develop pedagogical strategies to teach about the media while also using media to communicate with and engage their students. This shift to seeing media literacy education as central to teaching and learning requires extensive pre-service and professional development for teachers, resources and curricula, and technology support, as well as new assessment and evaluation methods. Continuing research and development for the media literacy field is expanding rapidly, and this Handbook is an excellent example of the type of academic research and experimentation that is so critical to continued growth of the field, and to realizing the promise of media literacy for society.

Media literacy delivers on the promise of enabling free expression and of promoting informed agency. It offers the freedom to be critical and the courage to be a skeptic. With a goal of making wise choices possible, media literacy education supports citizens to become efficient managers, wise consumers, responsible producers and active participants and citizens in today’s world.

In that world, fraught with risk and all the attendant perils, media literacy helps citizens recognizes that along with dangers come opportunities. And so we ask again, “What and Whom Can We Trust? What is Real?” And ultimately, the answers lie within ourselves, in our ability to discern and to choose and to act. It is what we bring to our relationship with media—even more than what media brings to us—that is a true test of our media literacy and our capacity for leading fulfilling lives. The foundations for media literacy must be laid to reap these benefits, from an early age and for everyone. We owe that to ourselves and our children, and indeed, to our local and global villages.

As practitioners of media literacy, we recognize that we will never be “the masters.” Indeed, in enhancing our own skills and understanding, we will always be students who are committed to sharing our experience, strength and hope. I invite you to see this Handbook as a forest with many intriguing paths to explore where media literacy may lead. Enjoy!

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